Three essays on existentialism & peace

02024-25

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Dear Conscience Canada supporters:

The Internet Archive, I firmly believe, is the greatest website in the world. It is the ultimate universal library, & thus one of the most important reservoirs of human history & culture ever imagined. It is my passion & my calling to contribute to this project, originally envisioned by the founder, Brewster Kahle. I find fulfilment in what I do - but today, I am enraged.

The world has never been closer to WWIII - a nuclear shooting gallery - than it is today.
Yet, so few politicians seem to have any motivation to do a damned thing about it!

We have Pierre Poilievre, our presumptive prime minister in-waiting, who is on the record for calling Vladimir Putin “evil”.
Way to go for diplomacy, Pierre. Hopefully you will learn more subtlety before being sworn in; I don’t intend on submitting to a draught because you shot your mouth off at somebody tougher & with more firepower behind him than Jagmeet or Justin. Using a religious term such as “evil” to describe another global leader is something best left to the popes & ayatollahs of the world, not to secular leaders of opposition parties. (I believe it was in his dissection of Christian morality in ‘The Will to Power’ where Nietzsche commented on the irony of Christian moralists being so quick to pass judgment on those who do not behave according to their moral system, ignoring the words of wisdom from the Book of Matthew: "Judge not, that ye be not judged".)

The prince of sunny ways himself, Justin Trudeau, has been no better. Between his signing off on Canada donating a small army's worth of materiel to the Kiev regime, his speeches at rallies whipping up Ukrainian nationalists here in Canada, & his government bringing in a Waffen-SS veteran to be applauded by the House of Commons, he has been no better than the Russophobic neocons in Washington.

I won't go into the Israel/Palestine conflict, which is so toxic, one needs a hazmat suit to even touch it. It is horrific that this conflict is now being played out in Canadian cities - outside of Jewish schools, hospitals, etc.

It is not lost on those of you who have been involved in pacifism far longer than I have that the people who are most eager to wage war are the people who are least likely to be negatively affected by it. This reality has been recognised at least as far back as when Creedence Clearwater Revival's 'Fortunate Son' was written, & it is no less applicable today. Not all of us have shelters in Raven Rock or other giant bunker complexes to hide in if we piss off the wrong country. Some of us actually have to live in the real world.

Many of our mis-leaders certainly do have a talent for whipping people up into a frenzy of anger. This is, of course, exactly what they want. If they can reduce we the people to responding only by primal emotion, instead of by rational thought, we are more easily herded. It's somewhat ironic that it has been Donald Trump - a man who has been accused of cultivating aggressive populism across the USA & whom many of you are not fans of - in his recent debate with Kamala Harris, warned that the world is tipping far too close to WWIII, and that we need to stop viewing wars as contests, in order to find solutions to stopping the killing as quickly as possible - "with a phone call", as he put it.

My interest in pacifism is not religious, as it respectfully is for many of you. I come at pacifism

more from a fiscal conservative point of view (Canada's federal debt is at $1.2 trillion, and counting; we don't have the wealth to spend on foreign wars), as well as from a men's rights perspective (historically, men are overwhelmingly most directly affected by war, from being draughted against their will, to being maimed & killed in combat, usually for causes they don't fully understand). Relating more to my training as a museologist and my volunteering as an archivist, the thought of the world's great works of art & architecture, as well as the people who made them & protect them, being obliterated in seconds by nuclear strikes, anguishes me.

Canada is too sparsely populated, too great in physical expanse, & our military too chronically underfunded to satisfactorily participate in NATO - an organisation which has long since outlived its purpose & now merely serves as an undemocratic lobby for the military-industrial complexes of its member-states. It is time to embrace a future of neutrality and non-involvement in the affairs of other states. I am inspired by the words of Austria's 01955 Declaration of Neutrality, Article I:

(1) For the purpose of the permanent maintenance of her external independence and for the purpose of the inviolability of her territory, Austria of her own free will declares herewith her permanent neutrality which she is resolved to maintain and defend with all the means at her disposal.
(2) In order to secure these purposes Austria will never in the future accede to any military alliances nor permit the establishment of military bases of foreign States on her territory.[1]

As for myself and my love of history, culture, & the life and times of those gone by, I cast myself on the protection of Articles 1 & 2 of the Roerich Pact:

ARTICLE I
The historic monuments, museums, scientific, artistic, educational and cultural institutions shall be

1 https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/Erv/ERV_1955_211/ERV_1955_211.pdf

considered as neutral and as such respected and protected by belligerents. The same respect and protection shall be due to the personnel of the institutions mentioned above. The same respect and protection shall be accorded to the historic monuments, museums, scientific, artistic, educational and cultural institutions in time of peace as well as in war.

ARTICLE II
The neutrality of, and protection and respect due to, the monuments and institutions mentioned in the preceding article, shall be recognized in the entire expanse of territories subject to the sovereignty of each of the signatory and acceding States, without any discrimination as to the State allegiance of said monuments and institutions. The respective Governments agree to adopt the measures of internal legislation necessary to insure said protection and respect.[2]

I know not if the world will be destroyed between now & when the next Conscience Canada newsletter might be published. Either way, I plan to enjoy as much as I can from the great artists and visionaries of human history, before all of what they created for us might be annihilated by actions set into motion by our irresponsible mis-leaders.

Thank-you for reading.

"Only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world justified." - Friedrich Nietzsche

2 https://www.roerich.org/roerich-pact.php

Tragic, avoidable, & embarrassing: The real cost of symbolic actions

"GeoWizard" is a British YouTuber, known for his expertise in the Internet game based on Google Maps called GeoGuessr. Perhaps more so, he is known for his "straight line missions": attempts to walk across an entire jurisdiction in a straight line, by following a pre-programmed GPS heading.

About four years ago, GeoWizard attempted a straight line mission across Norway - from the Swedish border to Norway's coastline. Now obviously, he had to give himself a margin of error of a few metres, but his intent was to keep his line of travel as straight as possible.

In the third episode of this adventure, he encountered a peat bog in his intended path.[3] In order to keep within his margin of error, he ventured to go through it.

Given that the bog was about the width of a swimming pool, he misjudged the hazard it posed. The bog quickly took hold of his legs, as quicksand might. Partway through it, he was unable to march further, & was only able to escape its viscous grip on his legs by laying on his chest & "swimming" across the surface until he got to drier land.

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3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwzIwFPEGbA

Creditting this swimming technique to Bear Grylls, he managed to pull himself, almost completely exhausted, & with the entire lower half of his body now covered in mud, out of the peat bog. Continuing on his hike, he mused about the danger he had voluntarily put himself in, & how a **"seemingly insignificant"** geographic feature had potentially nearly resulted in his death.

A particular comment he made while musing on the incident has, for some reason, stuck with me:

"I cannot think of a just more tragic, avoidable, & embarrassing, almost... way to end it."

I don't think I could have put it more accurately or succinctly. The incident had grounded him back to the reality that what he was doing was ultimately a symbolic action - something of zero practical use to any real measurable aspect of his life or the lives of others.

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Why did people start doing things for symbolism?

I think it is a product of the transition of prehistoric man - who lived essentially only by animalistic utilitarianism - to early modern man. Early modern man lost his connection to the realities of nature via domestication of animals, the advancement of agriculture, & the proliferation of literature. Men of power in the prehistoric era were men of strength & smarts alone. In the early modern era, mystics began to replace this role in some cases. This development gave avenue for low-status men to hack their way to privileged positions by claiming a special connection with the Creator and/or divine order, bypassing the previous need for a verifiable demonstration of power. This is the origin of organised religion as we know it today. (For more on this subject, I highly recommend Thomas Paine's book 'The Age of Reason'.) It has influenced our thinking over the centuries, leading us to believe, subconsciously or not, that there is an otherworldly intelligent entity looking over our shoulder, potentially with some, if not complete, ability to determine where we will go after our physical lives conclude.

As the power of organised religion has faded across most of the world since the Enlightenment, this tendency to

act on behalf of a non-specific, disembodied spectator has not left with it. It has only become less specific whom symbolic actions are directed towards. Whereas a thousand years ago, even five hundred years ago, these actions would have been directed to one of fewer than half a dozen gods, today the actions could be directed to multiple spectators at once, including at least one of these gods, internal political rivals, the voting public, & perhaps countless more.

When one is not the intended audience for a symbolic action, its manifestation can be a source of amusement, confusion, & even terror. For the author of the symbolic action who seeks great power, the latter two especially can be useful for them - for while individuals are precision instruments, herds are blunt force instruments, whose united capabilities are few & predictable.

GeoWizard is far from the first person to do something risky for symbolism or Internet fame. A few months ago, a young Mexican woman got too close to the bypassing Canadian Pacific 2816 “Empress”, which was on a cross-continent rail tour. She got too close to the passing train, & was brained by the wheel crank, in an attempt to get an impressive video on her smartphone.[4] Many of us remember the stupid Internet trend “planking”, which at least one young man died performing.[5] The Tide pod dare (to eat it) has now become a meme depicting the stupidity of today’s younger generations.[6] I don’t know whether or not that’s worse than the dare meme from a dozen years ago to drink an entire bottle of soya sauce (also potentially lethal).[7]

But these are all things that people did to themselves, even if coerced to do so by real people.
It’s a different matter when it’s people in positions of power committing others in positions of lesser power to make sacrifices on their behalf for a symbolic cause.

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For nearly ten years now, since the Trudeau Liberal government was first elected, the “fight against climate change” has been essentially the country’s top priority

4 https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13501307/pictured-woman-killed-steam-train-accident-selfie.html
5 https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/planking
6 https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/why-teenagers-eat-tide-pods-2018013013241
7 https://www.mashed.com/178380/food-challenges-that-broke-the-internet-this-past-decade/

(not as demanded by the electorate, but as demanded by the federal Cabinet). This pursuit has entailed the disapproval or cancellation of major revenue-generating hydrocarbon projects, a planned prohibition of domestic production of combustion engines, & a "carbon pricing" scheme that has made all aspects of life more expensive for Canadians. While the federal government has gone to great lengths to promotion this "energy transition" as both necessary & inevitable, on a global scale, the projection is that all of these efforts will have been for nothing. According to the C2C Journal[8]:

"... the resulting impact on climate change would be zero. This is because any emissions savings in Canada would be rendered immediately irrelevant by new emissions from China that, already by 2035, will likely be almost two orders of magnitude (100 times) larger than Canada's entire net-zero grid reductions..."

Has this symbolic effort by one country at least been a catalyst for economic growth in new-generation industrial sectors?

No.

David Williams of the Business Council of British Columbia writes, in regards to a 02021 OECD report:

"... [the report] **offers insights on whether Canadians can look forward to meaningful gains in average living standards in the decades to come. The findings are sobering. The OECD predicts Canada can at best achieve real per capita GDP growth of only 0.7 percent per annum over 2020-2030 (Figure 1a). This places us dead last among advanced countries."**

Although this OECD report is now about four years old, the situation has not improved as we have moved on from the covid lockdowns. In the months since I began working on this essay, the Trump administration in Washington has declared a trade war on Canada, as a result of his grievances over Canada's border insecurity & certain trade inequities. This sudden rift between the U.S. Government & Canada has enabled Justin Trudeau, in his final days as prime minister, to act in one more role: that of Captain Canada. After years of denigrating Canada as a state

8 https://c2cjournal.ca/2024/12/zero-chance-the-costly-futility-of-canadas-net-zero-emissions-electricity-grid/

predicated on genocide of Indigenous peoples and on climate crimes, claiming that our future was as a "post-national state", Justin & the Liberal Party have conveniently unleashed their inner patriots. This is not fooling everybody, for we guesstimate that if this trade war had been declared by a President Kamala Harris instead of President Donald Trump, the Liberal Cabinet would be calling for calm negotiation. But it does not matter who is POTUS, or which side has the stronger patriotic fervour - Canada has more to lose than to gain from a trade war with the USA. John Manley, a former federal finance minister, stated in a podcast with the Financial Post[9], **"there's no way we** [Canada] **win a trade war"** &, on the feasibility that Canada could diversify its trade away from the U.S. to punish Trump, **"If somebody thinks that we're going to replace market for eighty percent of what we export, that's... that's not even aspirational, that's delusional."**
This sentiment has been publicly shared by others, including founder of Rosenberg Research & Associates, David Rosenberg[10], & Professor in Food Distribution and Policy at Dalhousie University, Sylvain Charlebois.[11]

It is easier to play on patriotic reflexes of the general public (again, the herd morality) than it is to inform them of all the intricacies of our deep ties to the world's largest economy.
Accepting our dependency on our trade ties with the USA is much more difficult than waving Pearson's maple leaf rag. It is easier to feel than to think.
The federal Liberals have played on this - since Trump's inauguration, the Liberals' polling numbers have spiked.[12] While it is probable that this spike is due in part to Justin Trudeau's announcing a few days before Trump's inauguration that he would be stepping down as prime minister, this is yet another example of symbolism over substance in action. Although many other Liberal ministers have also announced that they do not intend to run again, many are remaining on, & stubbornly continue to imply that Canadians simply don't know what's good for themselves. Despite the party not making any major divergences from their signature policies of the past decade, their spike in polling suggests that many registered electors are satisfied that putting a new driver behind the wheel is

9 https://financialpost.com/news/economy/no-way-canada-can-win-a-trade-war-john-manley-shares-some-hard-truths
10 https://torontosun.com/business/money-news/economist-says-canada-should-avoid-a-trade-war-it-cant-win
11 https://macleans.ca/economy/why-canada-cant-win-a-trade-war-with-the-u-s/
12 https://338canada.com/federal.htm [acc. 23-2-25]

more important than taking this mechanically unsound vehicle off of the road for repairs.

The intoxication of symbolism overshadows the nutrition of substance again.

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For the federal Liberal Party, symbolism has also been a major factor in their policy formation regarding private ownership of firearms in Canada.

Recently, I received an email update from the National Firearms Association, an Edmonton-based advocacy group that I support for lawful ownership of firearms, on the 8th of December.

The first part of the message read as follows:

“Greetings,

In a troubling announcement just before the holidays, Public Safety Minister Dominic LeBlanc delivered an unwelcome gift to law-abiding Canadian firearms owners. At a press conference, LeBlanc revealed that 324 types of rifles and shotguns are, effectively immediately, banned through an Order in Council (OIC), including 185 firearms already registered as restricted. *And this is just the beginning. In February, even more firearms will be added to the growing.*

LeBlanc disclosed that an unelected RCMP task force has been quietly working behind closed doors to determine which firearms should be prohibited. This shadowy group operates without accountability or oversight—a stark departure from the promise of transparency and fairness originally entrusted to a firearms advisory committee.

It was also revealed that, under Phase 1, a confiscation initiative has begun, with a destruction program already in progress.

Firearms are already in the process of being destroyed. **We need to STOP them NOW.**

Even more shocking, LeBlanc stated in a French language committee hearing that "Phase 2 is when we will go to the

homes of individuals and Surete du Quebec and police will help us go look for those guns".

As if that weren't enough, LeBlanc indicated that some of the *seized firearms will be sent overseas to Ukraine*, a use that no Canadian firearms owner ever anticipated when they lawfully purchased their property. Canadians did not invest in firearms for them to be repurposed in international conflicts, potentially taking lives abroad.

Let's be clear: this is not about public safety. These bans won't reduce crime, stop illegal guns, or make our communities safer. Instead, they serve as political theater, designed to appease special interest groups, buy votes from the uninformed, and distract from this government's mounting scandals and dismal record on crime.

This desperate move by a government plummeting in the polls only underscores their willingness to scapegoat law-abiding Canadians. They've abandoned reason in favor of control—control over responsible citizens like hunters, sport shooters, and collectors who respect the law and enrich our communities."

It has been noted several times during the Trudeau Liberal administration that legal firearms owners, including those who own "assault-style weapons" (a.k.a. semi-automatics with synthetic stocks instead of wooden ones), are not the source of the vast majority of crimes involving firearms in Canada. Yet, it has been a pet project of this government to frame the "gun lobby" as a political enemy - perhaps more often than they portray the same of actual violent criminals. It is easier for the government to commit a symbolic act such as the above, rather than to actually increase law enforcement budgets. Plus, if it is true that the Government of Canada intends to send these appropriated firearms to Ukraine, then they will hit two symbolic actions with one stone. The Government of Canada has continually, and erroneously, referred to Ukraine (meaning, the corrupt & militaristic Zelenskyy regime), as an "ally" of Canada's, despite that country being neither a NATO member-state nor a neighbour

of ours. In fact, Ukraine is actually a competitor with Canada in the international grain market, just as the Russian Federation is our competitor in the international hydrocarbons market, & Belarus is our competitor in the international potash market. So, logically, Canada ought to treat none of these countries as allies - although that does not automatically mean they must be treated as enemies either. Additionally, sending firearms appropriated from their law-abiding Canadian owners presents a pair of ironies: for one, the intent in sending the guns to a warzone is that they will actually be used to kill people - something that they likely never would have been used for if only they had stayed in Canada; and for two, that the Government of Canada trusts nameless, faceless Ukrainians with Canadian guns more than they trust vetted Canadian citizens with them!

I am thankful that there have been enough influential people with the foresight to guess what might happen if NATO was pushed into direct conflict with the RF over Ukraine. It is not as though there has been any shortage of talking heads in think-tanks & media op-eds, speaking from their comfortable armchairs, insisting that the USA & other countries declare war on Russia. Even without a “hot war”, the taxpayers in the NATO countries (ironically, for being the so-called global defender of democracy, not one has ever been asked in a referendum if their country should be a NATO member-state or not) are out billions. Foreign aid not approved by the electorate in a referendum must automatically be considered stolen property - & the governments of the NATO member-states have stolen plenty from their citizens to give to Ukraine. It is especially bad for a country like Canada, being as how our own military has been chronically underfunded, our healthcare system is on the verge of total collapse, & our federal government is over a trillion dollars (CDN) in the red.

Hopefully, President Trump will be able to make good on his stated intention to bring the Russo-Ukrainian conflict to a ceasefire. I, for one, do not intend to jump into a meatgrinder as a symbolic last stand for a dying geopolitical paradigm. My life is worth more to me than to be one of a few million pawns to be expended by the self-

appointed masters of the world in Washington, Brussels, and Davos.

It's not the first time Canada & other NATO member-states have undemocratically made multi-billion dollar sacrifices for ultimately nothing. When the U.S. & its coalition forces invaded Afghanistan, I was only starting middle school. By the time of the final withdrawal of these coalition forces, I had graduated university. Did all that effort & expenditure over the years make Afghanistan a better place?

Apparently not.

Even the senile president Joe Biden knew it was well time to pack it in:

"We no longer had a clear purpose in an open-ended mission in Afghanistan," Biden said. "After more than $2 trillion spent in Afghanistan, costs that Brown University researchers estimated would be over $300 million a day for 20 years — yes, the American people should hear this... what have we lost as a consequence, in terms of opportunities? ...I refuse to send America's sons and daughters to fight a war that should have ended long ago."[13]

$2.3 trillion USD - spent by the USA alone - all to lose the country in a matter of days as the Taliban overran the country & took it back over as if twenty years had been flash-flooded away. That is just the dollar figure. The human costs - not simply combat casualties, but also personnel suicides, the long-term mental health costs for veterans, & the economic opportunity losses from trying to reintegrate these damaged souls into civilian life - are practically immeasurable.

Bringing the War in Afghanistan closer to home, Canada's small but significant contributions hit us hard as well:

"159 Canadian soldiers were killed and more than 1,800 were wounded during this period. In April 2019, the Canadian Forces' medical branch released a study that found that more than 155 active service members had taken their own

13 https://www.brown.edu/news/2021-09-01/costsofwar

lives since 2010, with many of these suicides linked to their deployment in Afghanistan.

In October 2008, the Parliamentary Budget Officer, in "the first comprehensive costing", reported: "The total projected mission cost of up to $18.1 billion over the 2001-02 to 2010-11 period, represents close to $1,500 dollars per Canadian household."[14]

For me, the senseless waste of Canada's contributionsto the War in Afghanistan is poetically embodied in the death of Captain Jonathan Snyder, a chisel-jawed twenty-six year old platoon commander from Penticton, serving with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.

Jonathan wasn't killed in any glorious shootout with the Taliban, or when defusing an IED from the side of the road.

He was on a night patrol southwest of Kandahar, when he tripped & fell down a well.[15]

What an absolute waste. Truly, "tragic, avoidable, & embarrassing".

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In my own research, a term that seems to frequently come up in the rhetoric of those who call for war is the need to be on "the right side of history". There is the saying "history is written by the victors". I say, however, that history is written by everybody - but the perceived "victor" writes the most promulgated version of that history. When people talk about "the right side of history", they are talking about one of two things. If their preferred side "wins", what they are describing is the court of public opinion. It is the democratic fallacy that something is right merely because it is popular. But, if their preferred side "loses", then what they are referring to is the divine judgment of their god. They

14 https://pbicanada.org/2021/08/15/looking-back-war-afghanistan/
15 https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/27419760/jonathan_sutherland-snyder

rest on the loser's mentality that "I may have lost, but at least I tried; God will reward me in the end." Either way, in their minds, they come out as winners. This is a dangerous mentality to have, for there is a cost to being on what they call "the right side of history" - & it is far from being borne equally by society. If those who promulgated the "right side of history" mentality weren't armchair admirals & paid content creators with opaque intentions, & actually had to put their own chips in the ante, their own asses on the line, as a deposit to see their geopolitical aspirations realised, they might be more inclined to seek compromise over coffins.

Has the reader ever seen the 01982 German film 'Das Boot', a semi-fictional depiction of life as lived by a U-boat crew during the Battle of the Atlantic? Despite its rather modern, techno effects, I think Klaus Doldinger's score for the movie was brilliant. I find the arrangement used for the movie's end credits to be particularly striking; the orchestra seems itself to be heaving with grief - & not without reason. As the movie's opening prologue states:

"40,000 German sailors served on U-boats during World War II.

30,000 never returned."

Far, far worse than the Battle of the Atlantic, was the Battle of Stalingrad. After the failed attempt by the German forces to fully extricate Soviet forces from the city, as well as the refusal by the fanatical leadership of both sides to allow their troops to retreat to fight another day, the battle for the city became a grim, building-to-building fight, on top of the threat of starvation. The battle for the city was so horrific that an accurate casualty count has never been compiled.

"During this battle, the Axis forces suffered an estimated 850,000 casualties... The Soviet Union suffered 1,129,619 military (which included 478,741 killed or missing) and about 40,000 civilian casualties. The 40,000 figure included only civilians within Stalingrad city; there were

also significant civilian casualties in the suburbs that could not be determined."[16]

The German government in this war fell within four years of this battle, the Soviet government in fifty. Neither lasted the span of a breath in political science time. Bearing that in mind, considering how many men were forced into battle under horrific conditions to kill other men, & the amount of capital expended for them to function as or operate other instruments of destruction, the total costs of this battle are unimaginable.

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I am sure I could uncover more examples of the foolish level of value humans have placed on symbolic actions. But I feel that I've taken the reader on a long-enough journey. (If you're still with me, thank-you for reading. I put a considerable effort, especially on an emotional level, into these essays.) Ultimately, what I hope the reader will take away from this essay is that placing a premium on the value of symbolism can be an extremely costly price to pay for a lazy mind. When that lazy mind is that of an authority figure, that extreme cost may be born by those who had no say in the matter, & may be paid for with their lives.

16 https://ww2db.com/battle_spec.php?battle_id=3

EXTRA: Justin Trudeau, a privileged White man who road his father's name to the leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada, & later the Prime Minister's Office, commented on the re-election of Donald Trump as POTUS:

"... just a few weeks ago, the United States voted for a second time to not elect its first woman president. Everywhere, women's rights and women's progress is under attack. Overtly, and subtly."[17]

Justin himself competed against multiple women for the leadership of the Liberal Party - something he never acknowledges. He also seems to have an incoherent problem with infringing on "women's rights and women's progress" - a.k.a. "the right to choose" (to abort her child) - but not with infringing on an electorate's "right to choose" their preferred candidate, in another country no less.
We can presume he would not have said this if the Republican nominee had been a woman & the Democratic nominee had been a man.
Meanwhile, since beginning my work on this essay, Justin Trudeau has been replaced as Liberal leader by another privileged White man. This candidate steamrolled over two women who were also running for the Liberal Party leadership.

17 https://www.westernstandard.news/news/watch-proud-feminist-trudeau-surmises-not-electing-kamala-means-americans-are-sexist/60359

The ultimate monster is our self (!!!)

I grew up watching 'M*A*S*H*' on TV, Hawkeye Pierce being perhaps the first adult male character I knew from a production not intended for children. Those who know the series, know that resistance to war despite being in & amongst it, was its core theme through its long run. As the series aged, episodes became less about comedy & more about tragedy than in the earlier seasons. A few screenplays got quite creative, such as the headcam episode[18], seen entirely through the eyes of a soldier brought to the camp with a minor throat wound. Other episodes venture into more disturbing territory for daytime television.

One of the best-written episodes from a philosophical & psychological theme is S9E2[19], in which a friend of Hawkeye's back home, who is a school teacher, has all her students write letters to the M*A*S*H* 4077th crew, & the main cast each get a fistful of letters to read & reply to, with Hawkeye setting the rule **"no stealing, selling, or swapping"** of them. Amidst several interesting letters & replies from different personnel, Hawkeye is stumped by a hard-hitting letter from a bitter young boy. The boy's older brother had been sent to Korea to fight in the war. After having been wounded & subsequently repaired at a M*A*S*H* unit, his brother was returned to the front & was later killed. The boy blamed the M*A*S*H* doctors for sending his brother back to the front lines, & concluded with the blunt statement "**I hate you all.**"
Hawkeye, very disturbed & perplexed by the letter, takes it to Father Mulcahy to lay his feelings on the padre:

18 https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0638385/
19 https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0638345/

HAWKEYE: “Essentially, he’s saying I’m a very large cog in the war machine... I’m not so sure he’s wrong.”
MULCAHY: “Hawkeye, might I remind you that you don’t take lives - you save them.”
HAWKEYE: “I’m also in weapons repair... [drops of rain are heard outside] I fix guys up so they can go out & get killed... or, kill other people.
I can’t deny that - & I can’t live with it either.”

At this point in the series, a regular viewer is aware of Hawkeye’s humanitarianism & pacifism. He was in Korea only because he was drafted, & had so far spent his tour in Korea with an air of self-righteousness regarding his role in the army (which became increasingly arrogant & irritating in the later seasons). After nearly a decade of episodes subjecting the audience to the perception, from Hawkeye’s own point of view, that he was a source of hope amidst the tragedy of war, the viewer was hit with an unexpected pivot. Suddenly, Hawkeye is cornered inescapably by the reality that he is not so detached from the mechanations of war as he believed heretofore.

About three years earlier, in S5E13[20], another brilliantly-written episode, Hawkeye goes through an ordeal in which he begins sleepwalking & having nightmares in which the terrors of warfare are being inflicted upon his boyhood friends back in Maine.
In counselling Hawkeye, B.J. tells him, **“You’re in the middle of a war, Hawk; you’re supposed to be scared.”**
He replies, **“No, not ‘this’ scared, not this way. It’s one thing to live in a shooting gallery. But now I’m being attacked from inside. I’m afraid to lie down on my sack. I’m afraid to close my eyes! How do I defend myself from myself?”**

Hawkeye was lucky in that, despite encountering this snag in his perception of his place in the war, that the taking of lives was not part of his duties. In S4E9, Captain Chandler, a crewman from a downed B-29, is brought into the M*A*S*H* 4077th on a bus with a minor head wound, but with a much worse mental condition. The man refers to himself as “Jesus Christ”, & apparently has no recollection of his earlier life or what his official duties in Korea are. Upon examination by psychiatrist Dr. Sidney Freedman, a recurring character with a very believable, gentle demeanour, Freedman concludes that the man had experienced

20 https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0638321/

ego death, & replaced his ego with that of Jesus. He had indirectly participated in the killing of so many people that, upon realising what he had done, was so unable to live with himself, that he ejected his perceived self from his reality & replaced it with a new ideal self.

Another production, coincidentally released around the same time as the "Letters" episode of 'M*A*S*H*', that focussed on the issue of one's sense of humanity in war, was a German movie that is probably the only one from that country known worldwide by its original title: 'Das Boot'. Perhaps not as popular as many other productions for the simple fact that it is portrayed from the German point of view, plus its very long runtime, & despite the Battle of the Atlantic being more impersonal than, say, the battles that infantrymen faced, it nevertheless reminds the viewer of the sense of humanity inside us all.

The scene from 'Das Boot' that most potently captures this is the scene about midway through, in which the captain of the U-boat surfaces at night to observe the still-floating wreckage of a burning British tanker. The captain & several of the more prominent characters view it through their binoculars from the conning tower. It is burning heavily, the flames lighting up the night. The captain decides to put one torpedo into the tanker as a coup-de-grace. After the torpedo impacts, the U-boat crew observe merchant sailors fleeing the ship, some of them covered with burning oil. Some of the sailors notice the U-boat, & begin to swim towards it, in the hope of being rescued. The submarines of the time were essentially sardine cans with propellers, with claustrophobic living conditions even for the designated crew; there was no space aboard or provisions aboard for prisoners. The captain grimly orders the engines reverse one-half, as the merchants sailor try in vain to swim to the U-boat. One of the U-boat crew observing the situation from the conning tower, who looks about eighteen, buries his face into his sleeve & begins to weep audibly.

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All of these above stories are fictional, of course, however connected to real-world events they are. Of course, the reality is worse rather than better, because you can't just turn the TV off. Once you've killed somebody, you have to lay your head down at night & live with the knowledge of that forever. Given that military veterans commit suicide at a greater-than-average rate than

the general population, despite the fact that the majority of military personnel never kill anybody, & that there tends to be a code of silence & denial within these organisations, I think it's safe to say that the armed forces are a mental health tar pit.

I remember a few years ago reading part of a book titled 'Factories of Death' by one Sheldon H. Harris. The topic of the book is the foundation, operation, & eventual dismantlement of Japanese bioweapons development. The activities carried about by Unit 731 was the stuff of nightmares, which included experimentation on live prisoners. It is mentioned at one point that it was a regular occurrence for newly-arrived young scientists to go to the washroom at night to weep in private about the terrors that they were participating in.

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None of us ever really know each other, or even ourselves. All we are capable of doing is interpreting the signals sent to us via our senses, by distilling them through a psychological distillery that is the combination of the quality of our senses, & the biases that have been instilled in us through our education & experiences. We create gods, & monsters, by putting what we perceive of people, & other things, into arbitrary categories - heuristics, in order to prolong our comfort & our lives. We can never know the full person, or thing, because we only perceive them intermittently, & through various lenses.

When I was about sixteen, I made the mistake of watching one of the al-Qaeda beheading videos made in Iraq in 02004. Even being at 144p at most, it was still one of the worst things I have ever seen on video, & part of me wishes I had never seen it. My mind turned the terrorists into devils, belonging to the pits of Hell, who deserved eternal punishment for what the did.

Also when I was about sixteen, I had a crush on British pop singer Rachel Stevens. Listening to her song 'I Will Be There' turned her into a sort of goddess to me - not an atypical feeling a teenager may have to certain celebrities.

Neither of these perceptions were entirely healthy. I only perceived both these terrorists, & this pop singer, through several lenses constructed by what the media

allowed me to see, & by my pre-existing moral code & perceptions of different kinds of people.

The most terrifying thing to many people is to have these pre-existing codes & perceptions shattered, because their entire psychological framework is supported by them. Without them, they are at risk of mental breakdown. We struggle to bring ourselves to acknowledge that those people or things in our minds we have morphed into monsters, can also be capable of doing things that we perceive as good. Likewise, those people & things we deify, are capable of doing what we perceive to be great evil.

We look at certain people throughout history whom we detest & we refer to them as “monsters”. In doing so, we are not so much attacking them as we are deifying ourselves, by trying to create an unnatural separation between ourselves & them. We want to believe that these people are controlled by evil forces from a nether dimension, not ordinary human impulses - because if the latter were true, then we would have to accept that these people who committed these heinous are not all that different from ourselves.

We are ALL capable of being “monsters”.

As we have seen like never before with the recent elections in the U.S., people have lumped huge sums of other people into negative categories. People who have personally done very little besides mind their own business have been turned into monsters in the minds of others.

If I had a genie to grant me only one wish, it would be for nobody in the world to perceive me as one of those monsters.

END